APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY
2014 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Keystone SMILES Community Learning Center

Program Name: Keystone SMILES ES/AmeriCorps   Application ID: 14AC157750

For the purpose of enhancing our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), we are providing specific feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of this application. These comments are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment; rather the analysis represents those elements that had the greatest bearing on the rating of the application. Please note that this feedback consists of summary comments from more than one reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem to be inconsistent or contradictory. Comments are not representative of all of the information used in the final funding decision.

Reviewers' Summary Comments:

Strengths:

The applicant presents compelling evidence on the effects of generational cycles of poverty on children in rural Pennsylvania. Keystone SMILES will address the academic, social, and emotional impediments of 24,840 (8,280 per year) rural children and youth and engage them in service learning projects. The proposed 24 districts that will be served by the program all failed to make AYP in 2012.

The data cited strongly supports the need for one-on-one academic assistance, mentoring programs, and service learning projects as a means of addressing the cycle of failure of the target population. The applicant documents that only 18% of all eligible students receive academic support. Nearly one in four (23%) live in counties below the poverty level, and about 31% come from households whose incomes are 200% below the poverty line.

Only 18% of the students in these rural districts who have been identified as needing academic assistance are provided it because of a lack of monetary and personnel resources, demonstrating a high need.

Keystone SMILES is the only program helping to meet this need over a 9,000 square mile area, serving more than 86,000 children and youth, demonstrating the importance and urgency of their work.

The proposal notes that, from a 2009 study of rural Pennsylvania school district superintendents, 91% cited students' need for academic support programs. Coupled with this statistic is the added fact that only 18% of all eligible students received the support they needed. This suggests that there is a need to provide academic support services for students.

The proposal states that the target area of service is economically disadvantaged with the family income and per capita earnings well below the national averages.

The proposal notes that 41% of the school districts that are within the targeted geographic area fell below the AYP

targets in the state. This suggests that the targeted schools are of academic need, especially given the fact that, 10 years ago, none of the schools were achieving AYP targets for the state. While the schools have shown some improvement, the need to improve school performance is a longstanding problem.

The identified outcomes of the applicant's program are aligned with the needs of students living with generational poverty and limited school resources.

The Theory of Change in the logic model is well described.

The proposed program of service shows evidence of being effective at assisting students in these gaps.

The proposal cites studies that suggest that extended learning time can contribute to a variety of successes for students, such as: increased graduation rates, grades and test scores improving, and positive changes in non-cognitive factors related to student success, like persistence and positive social behavior.

The proposal notes that there have been positive outcomes for students related to their participation in service learning, such as: improved grades, increases in measures of motivation, and positive changes to academically-related attitudes.

Two quasi-experimental studies are cited within the evidence base for service learning. This suggests that there is some rigor to the proposal's evidence-base.

The proposal provides data from the applicant's previous work. For example, in the 2012-13 school year, 6,460 students showed an increase in academic engagement related to their involvement in SMILES extended learning time program.

The logic model comprehensively lists elements of the intervention such as the dosage, duration, and the targeted demographic.

The applicant aligns three target areas (academic, mentoring, service learning) with the activities of the intervention program and the intended outcomes.

The intervention clearly aligns mentoring activities with the targeted outcome of increased academic engagement.

The logic model demonstrates a large-scale plan to include 227 AmeriCorps members at 70 school sites serving 6,000 students, including tutoring, Response to Intervention, credit recovery, test preparation, and progress monitoring.

The proposal provides a logical alignment of the inputs, activities and outputs. This is evidenced by mentioning the number of AmeriCorps members serving in the program including the number of full-, half- and quarter-time members leading to improved student performance as measured by students' grade-level progress, classroom behavior and ultimately, improved graduation rates and post-secondary educational opportunities.

The inputs and outputs are linked with specific activities, such as small group instruction, credit remediation and test

preparation, as well as explicitly stating the dosage of the activities during the school year and the summer.

The applicant's past performance is well-documented. The number of students served exceed the target number in social/behavioral support and an equally high number of students improved in the targeted skills.

The applicant reports an increase from 41% to 46% on AYP targets of the 24 schools served by Keystone SMILES.

The program details measurable annual outcomes noting that 6,460 students demonstated increase in academic engagement as a result of the expanded learning activities provided by AmeriCorps.

Strong data evidence is provided to support the success of the program. Of the 19,942 in the tutoring program, eighty-eight (88%) percent of the targeted population gained a grade level in their target subject area surpassing the outcome target of 80%. A total of 80% was promoted or graduated, 81% of the students in the behavioral program gained target level skills, and 84% of the students tutored by AmeriCorps raised their Pennsylvania State Standardized Assessments (PSSA) scores to the proficiency level.

All performance measures during the last three years of AmeriCorps programs were met or exceeded, including serving an additional 6,000 students.

Data is included that demonstrates strong gains in academic performance and achievement.

The proposal provides anecdotal evidence from school district staff that the previous AmeriCorps service carried out by SMILES was effective in improving student outcomes. This suggests that the work in the past has met with some success through the eyes of the staff.

The proposal also provides data from the applicant's previous work. This suggests direct success on the problem that the applicant intends to continue to address.

The proposal mentions that, through prior work, SMILES has always met or exceeded the performance measures set for them. This implies additional success with respect to supporting students academically.

As stated in the Past Performance section of the narrative, in the previous three years, 88% of students served and evaluated gained a grade level in their target subject area, surpassing the Intermediate Outcome target of 80%. A total of 98% were promoted to the next grade or graduated, 13% more than the End Outcome target of 85%. 4,995 students received social/behavioral support from Members, exceeding the target by 2,595 students. 81% gained the target level of skills, 11% more than the Intermediate Outcome target. These data suggest that the additional academic support that the AmeriCorps program is providing is addressing the intended problem successfully.

Weaknesses:

The reference to the "Framework to Understanding Poverty" was unclear as to which specific hardships people in poverty face and how this program is designed to meet their needs.

While the proposal provides school performance data as the percentage of schools not achieving AYP, it does not

specify patterns in performance or what is the educational problem that needs to be addressed (e.g. reading test performance, math test performance, graduation, attendance). This is significant since this specificity would suggest that the need will be addressed by a specific intervention.

The applicant does not provide information on the study design for some of the data provided, making the level of impact inconclusive.

It is unclear what specific programs will be used and how they will break the cycle of poverty.

The proposal cites two quasi-experimental designed studies within the evidence-base for this work, but these two quasi-experimental designs are not described to know what age group or grade level was involved, what the nature and dosage of service learning was involved, or if they were from a similar subgroup (rural).

It is established that mentoring programs will yield results, but the quality of the outcome can be affected by the numbers to be served. It is unclear how many students the 227 AmeriCorps members will actually serve. The applicant gives a breakdown that totals 9,500 but then states that the project will serve 6,000. Lack of clarity makes it difficult to discern the degree of alignment and ability to achieve the projected success rates.

The output is vague and does not list specific goals for the many programs, so the activities and output do not align.

The lack of information on the total number of students in the groups reporting success with the program makes it difficult to determine the program's level of impact. Some of the data simply state the number of years the program has been in existence or the number of students demonstrating proficiency in a given year.

Because some data including the performance standards that were proposed prior to the program's start were not included, it was not possible to judge the program's effectiveness.